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Security Council

Sixty-sixth year

Provisional

6692nd meeting

Tuesday, 20 December 2011, 10.15 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Mr. Barbalić
	Brazil	Mrs. Viotti
	China	Mr. Sun Xiaobo
	Colombia	Mr. Osorio
	France	Mr. Araud
	Gabon	Mr. Messone
	Germany	Mr. Berger
	India	Mr. Vinay Kumar
	Lebanon	Mr. Salam
	Nigeria	Mr. Onemola
	Portugal	Mr. Cabral
	South Africa	Mr. Sangqu
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Mark Lyall Grant
	United States of America	Mrs. DiCarlo

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Russian*): Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco.

Mr. Fernandez-Taranco: Credible progress in the search for peace between Israel and the Palestinians is more urgent than ever, but it has remained elusive in the context of tensions on the ground, deep mistrust between the parties and volatile regional dynamics. Over the past month, violent incidents erupted at a worrisome rate. Another dangerous round of escalation also occurred in Gaza. The realization of the two-State solution has not advanced, eroding hopes and underscoring the urgent need for both sides to engage without further delay in serious substantive negotiations to resolve all permanent status issues.

Efforts to help the parties resume direct talks continue. On 14 December, Quartet envoys and Quartet Representative Blair held their third round of separate meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. They reiterated the 23 September statement by Quartet principals (see SG/2178) and stressed the important objective of a direct exchange between the parties without delay or preconditions, beginning with a preparatory meeting and leading to the presentation of comprehensive proposals on territory and security. The envoys called on the parties to create an environment conducive to restarting talks and urged both sides to refrain from provocative actions.

We continue to believe that de-escalation is necessary to facilitate the resumption of direct, meaningful engagement between the two sides. It is encouraging that, at the last meeting with the Quartet envoys, both Israel and the Palestinians signalled a willingness to think constructively about reciprocal actions that may help reduce tensions. Envoys will intensify their efforts to help the parties in that regard.

It is worth noting that, while the Palestinian flag was raised at UNESCO headquarters on 13 December, the Palestinian Authority has not taken further steps towards membership in other United Nations organs or specialized agencies. The Government of Israel decided on 30 November to renew the transfer of tax and customs revenues owed to the Palestinian Authority, which had been withheld after the vote at UNESCO. It is critical that such transfers continue regularly and predictably, so as to safeguard the achievements of the Palestinian Authority's State-building agenda.

The reporting period witnessed a series of developments that are cause for continued serious concern. Several new settlement constructions have been announced. On 27 November, a plan for the construction of 119 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Shilo was approved. On 7 December the construction permit process for 14 housing units in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ras al-Amud advanced closer to completion. On 12 December, approval was given for the construction of 40 homes and a farm near the West Bank settlement of Efrat, close to the Palestinian town of Bethlehem, impeding the natural development of that Palestinian urban centre. On 17 December, the Government of Israel announced its intention to issue construction tenders for 1,028 housing units in the settlements of Har Homa, Beitar Illit and Giv'at Ze'ev. As the Secretary-General reaffirmed on 12 December, all settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory is contrary to international law and Israel's obligations under the road map, prejudices final status negotiations and should stop.

During the reporting period, 57 Palestinian structures, comprising 28 residences, were demolished in the West Bank owing to the lack of permits. Six of those demolitions took place in East Jerusalem, marking the resumption of demolitions of residential structures in the city following a period of relative restraint.

Throughout this year, we have repeatedly warned about the increase in settler violence. It is deeply troubling that attacks by settlers on Palestinians and their property have become a systematic occurrence — often, but not exclusively, in the context of anticipated

Government action against illegal settlement construction. Six Palestinians, including two children, were injured by settlers during the reporting period. On 14, 18 and 19 December, cars and other Palestinian property were set on fire. Several mosques were also targeted. On 7 December, an arson attack was carried out against a mosque in the West Bank village of Burqin. On 15 December, a mosque in Burka village, close to Ramallah, was set on fire. On 19 December, a mosque was desecrated near Hebron. In addition, on 13 December, a mosque that is not currently in use was desecrated in West Jerusalem. During the night of 12 December, several dozen Israeli extremists stormed an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) base and blocked adjacent roads in the West Bank. In parallel, a group of Israeli extremists approached the border with Jordan and was stopped from crossing by the IDF. We welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu's strong condemnation of such violent acts and his stated intent to prevent such incidents from reoccurring. It is critical that those statements be translated into swift and decisive action, including for the protection of Palestinians and their property.

Demonstrations against the barrier in the occupied West Bank continue on a regular basis, as the barrier's route deviates from the Green Line in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. On 10 December, a Palestinian protesting the takeover of privately-owned land by Israeli settlers died from wounds sustained the day before in the West Bank locality of Nabi Saleh, when an IDF soldier fired a tear gas canister at close range from an armoured IDF vehicle at which the protester had been throwing stones. Sixty-one Palestinians and three IDF soldiers were also injured during similar protests. We await the results of the investigation that was launched by the Israeli authorities. Allow me to stress that the right to peaceful protest must be upheld and that protests should be kept strictly non-violent.

During the reporting period, citing security reasons, the Israel Defense Forces conducted 337 operations in the West Bank, during which 154 Palestinians were injured, including six children, and 233 arrested. On 18 December, 550 prisoners, including 55 minors and six women, were released as part of the second phase of the agreement to exchange prisoners for captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Palestinian security forces have continued working to uphold law and order in the West Bank, including seizing and defusing unexploded devices on 21 and 23 November and 3 December. Close cooperation has continued with Israeli security forces, leading to the arrest of a number of suspected perpetrators of violence against Palestinians and their properties.

In East Jerusalem, Palestinian residency rights remain a serious human rights concern. On 6 December, the second of four Hamas-affiliated members of the Palestinian Legislative Council from East Jerusalem, who had been sheltered by the International Committee of the Red Cross since June 2010, was deported from East Jerusalem to Ramallah. In a separate development, the Mughrabi Gate ramp to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, through which tourists and non-Muslims access the compound, was reopened on 14 December after a temporary closure over safety concerns raised by the municipality.

In Gaza and southern Israel, we once again witnessed a dangerous deterioration in the security situation. On 7 December, an Islamic Jihad militant was killed and another critically wounded by an Israeli Air Force missile. Israel has said that the two militants were planning to launch an attack along the buffer zone. On 8 December, an Israeli air strike killed two militants in Gaza City and injured 10 civilians. Israel stated that one of the militants had been involved in attacks against Israel before and was planning more. The firing of projectiles from Gaza into Israel intensified in the wake of the air strike, with no reported damage or injuries. The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process has actively supported Egyptian efforts to restore calm.

During the entire reporting period, 45 projectiles, including five Grad rockets, were fired from Gaza into Israel. The IDF conducted nine incursions and 13 air strikes, resulting in the deaths of three Palestinian militants and three civilians, while five Palestinian militants and 21 civilians sustained injuries. We condemn in the strongest terms any indiscriminate firing of projectiles towards civilian areas and call on Israel to show maximum restraint. Obligations under international humanitarian law must be respected for the protection of civilians.

The implementation of United Nations projects with a total value of approximately $365 million continues in Gaza and construction materials for those projects are entering through the Kerem Shalom crossing. Special Coordinator Serry recently visited Gaza and noted the progress being made in the Khan Younis housing project and a number of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) schools. While three major UNRWA housing projects are still pending approval, that progress improves the lives of people in Gaza and must be sustained and expanded. We are encouraged by a limited resumption of agricultural exports to Europe, worth an estimated $25 million during the reporting period.

However, extensive restrictions remain in place, and the needs of Gaza's civilian population remain significant. We continue to call for the full liberalization of imports of construction materials as a means of enabling the legitimate economy and replacing the illicit tunnel trade. It is important that exports be allowed to resume at scale, including transfers to the West Bank. Those changes could be applied with due consideration for Israel's legitimate security concerns, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009) in all its aspects, and could make a significant difference in the lives of many Gazans. We will continue to work with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority in that regard.

We are concerned by the de facto authorities' intent to tax the Bank of Palestine and the Palestine Islamic Bank, as well as the subsequent travel ban on senior bank staff. The regular functioning of the banking sector is vital to the Gazan economy. Furthermore, the United Nations relies on the financial services of those institutions for its operations in Gaza.

This past weekend, a series of meetings among the Palestinian factions began in Cairo as part of efforts to advance Palestinian reconciliation. The finalization of many of the key provisions of the reconciliation accord remains outstanding, and meetings will continue throughout this week. We continue to support reconciliation efforts within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Finally, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Mr. Frank La Rue, visited the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel from 6 to 17 December, the first such visit. He shared his initial findings and recommendations in Jerusalem on 18 December.

Allow me now to turn to Lebanon, where a number of incidents in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have raised concerns since we last briefed the Council. On 9 December, the detonation of a roadside explosive device targeting a UNIFIL patrol in the suburbs of Tyre injured five peacekeepers and two Lebanese civilian bystanders. The Secretary-General and this Council condemned the attack, which was the third direct attack against UNIFIL this year, and the first one in the UNIFIL area of operations since June 2007.

Two rocket-launching incidents have occurred in recent weeks. The Council has already been briefed on the rocket-firing incident of 29 November. On 11 December, one rocket was fired from the general area of Qaissiyeh valley towards Israel. The rocket hit a private home in the Lebanese village of Houla, just a few kilometres from the Blue Line, causing serious injuries to a woman inside the house. In addition, on 19 December, four rockets, ready to be fired, were found by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in the UNIFIL area of operation. The Secretary-General condemns all indiscriminate rocket attacks and urges all parties to exercise maximum restraint. He reminds them of their obligation to fully adhere to resolution 1701 (2006) and to respect the cessation of hostilities.

The Lebanese authorities and politicians across the political spectrum in Lebanon have condemned all of those incidents, which represent attempts to undermine resolution 1701 (2006) and destabilize the situation in the south of Lebanon. Investigations into all of them are ongoing. The LAF and UNIFIL have also stepped up their individual and joint operational activities to prevent the occurrence of similar incidents. Meanwhile, Israeli flights over Lebanese airspace have continued on an almost daily basis, and there has been no progress on other outstanding issues in connection with resolution 1701 (2006).

In a positive development, Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced on 30 November that he had transferred Lebanon's share of the budget of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon for 2011. The Secretary-General welcomed that important step and expressed to

Prime Minister Mikati his confidence in Lebanon's continued respect for its international obligations.

The situation inside the Palestinian refugee camp Ain el-Hilweh in Saida/Sidon remains tense, following two recent assassination attempts on bodyguards of local Palestinian Liberation Organization leaders and subsequent infighting between Palestinian factions. Two bodyguards of the leader of the Palestinian Armed Struggle, Colonel Mahmoud Issa, were killed on 14 and 18 December as a result of those attempts.

The situation in Syria remains a source of deep and growing concern for the United Nations. On 12 December, High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay briefed the Council on the continued widespread violations of human rights in Syria, after which the Secretary-General transmitted the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to the Council. In recent days, popular protests have continued to be met with violent repression, resulting in numerous deaths, injuries and detentions. Instances of armed confrontation between the Government forces and the opposition have also increased. We have growing concerns about the humanitarian impact of the crisis on civilians inside Syria.

The League of Arab States has continued its commendable initiative to end the violence and promote a political solution. In that regard, we are encouraged by the signing yesterday in Cairo of a protocol to dispatch monitors from the League of Arab States to Syria, and we continue to hope that the international community will be able to act in a concerted and coherent manner in support of those efforts for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

The United Nations continues to monitor the influx of displaced Syrian nationals into northern Lebanon. As of 16 December, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Lebanese Government had registered 4,510 displaced persons, up from 3,581 the previous month. The increase is largely due to refugees who had crossed into Lebanon earlier but who registered only recently. The number of wounded individuals admitted to Lebanese health facilities as a result of fighting on the Syrian side of the border has also increased. Turkey and Jordan now host about 8,500 and 2,000 displaced Syrian nationals respectively. The United Nations continues to coordinate closely with those Governments on providing assistance to the displaced persons.

Turning back to the Middle East peace process, let me conclude by reiterating our worry that as the year draws to a close, the situation on the ground is deteriorating and the path towards peace remains dangerously uncertain. We must not allow such negative dynamics to prevail; too much is at stake. Our challenge remains to help the parties overcome them, and I urge them to utilize the opportunity provided by the framework laid out by the Quartet to de-escalate the situation, return to direct talks with serious proposals on borders and security, and stop provocations. The Quartet remains focused on achieving progress in the coming period, and the parties can be assured that the United Nations will continue to play its role in support of their efforts to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.